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SIGMUND FREUD: Collector of Antiquities Student of Archaeology

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# SIGMUND FREUD

## Collector of Antiquities

## Student of Archaeology

By RITA RANSOHOFF

The letters of Freud cited in the article below may be found in the following publications: to Martha Bernays, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*, selected and edited by Ernst L. Freud (New York, Basic Books, 1960) 176; to Marie Bonaparte, *Freud: Living and Dying*, by Max Schur (New York, International Universities Press, 1972) 485; to Sandor Ferenczi, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, by Ernest Jones (New York, Basic Books, 1957) volume 3, 84, 149; to Wilhelm Fliess, *The Origins of Psychoanalysis: Sigmund Freud's Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes, 1887-1902*, edited by Marie Bonaparte, Anna Freud and Ernst Kris (New York, Basic Books, 1954) 223, 252, 333, 355; to Carl Jung, *The Freud/Jung Letters*, edited by William McGuire (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1974) 260; to Arnold Zweig, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig*, edited by Ernst L. Freud (New York, Harcourt Brace and World, 1970) 119.

*There were Assyrian kings—tall as trees and holding lions for lap dogs in their arms, winged human animals with beautifully dressed hair, cuneiform inscriptions as clear as if they had been done yesterday, and then Egyptian bas-reliefs decorated in fiery colors, veritable colossi of kings, real sphinxes, a dreamlike world.* (SIGMUND FREUD'S FIRST VISIT TO THE LOUVRE MUSEUM. FREUD TO HIS FIANCÉE, MARTHA BERNAYS, OCTOBER 19, 1885.)

Sigmund Freud was a twenty-nine-year old student living in Paris when he wrote this lyrical description of his first encounter with the Assyrian and Egyptian collections in the Louvre. His letter reveals a Freud who is generally unknown—the student of archaeology, for whom collecting was a passion, an “addiction,” as he himself called it, which he carried throughout his life. A man of enormous personal energy as well as inveterate curiosity, a traveler who loved to visit the Classical Mediterranean world, Freud was interested in arti-



Sigmund Freud working on the monograph *Moses and Monotheism*. This photograph is one of a series taken by Edmund Engelman shortly after the Nazi invasion of Austria in 1938 and just before Freud, who was over eighty, fled to England. Because of Nazi surveillance, the photographs had to be taken in secrecy with natural light. Engelman soon fled Vienna, and the negatives were left behind. They turned up in London where they had come into Anna Freud's possession. Photograph, copyright Edmund Engelman and Basic Books Inc., all rights reserved. Engelman's photographs of Freud's Home will be published by Basic Books Inc.

facts and archaeological sites not merely for their intrinsic beauty but also for the great light they shed on man's past. As his biographer Ernest Jones has pointed out, Freud's self-imposed task of deciphering the meaning of man's mental life directed him "toward the past, whether of the individual or of mankind as a whole. . . ." (*The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* [New York 1957] volume 3, 316.) He searched out evidence wherever man had left a thumbprint, in mythology, anthropology, ancient history and religious practices; in art and archaeology; even in the recurring symbols of the dream.

Freud's collection was described by the American poet H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), who was a patient of Freud's from 1933 to 1934. She recorded her first impression of the

doctor's office: "I look around the room. A lover of Greek art, I am automatically taking stock of the room's contents. Priceless lovely objects are displayed here on the shelves to right and left of me. I have been told about the Professor, his family, his way of life. . . . But no one has told me that his room was lined with treasures. . . . There were the immemorial Gods ranged in their semi-circle on the Professor's table. . . . There were these Gods, each the carved symbol of an idea or a deathless dream. . . ." (*Tribute to Freud* [New York 1956] 98.)

A visual record of his collection also exists. From his Vienna days there survive the remarkable photographs taken by Edmund Engelman at the instigation of some colleagues. They preserve views of his apartment and in-





Egyptian limestone stele, ca. 300 B.C. Height, 20½ inches. All the single artifacts pictured in the article, with the exception of the mummy lid fragment shown on page 107, are from Freud's collection and were loaned by Anna Freud for an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York.

Photograph by Eric Pollitzer.

clude numerous pictures of the consulting room and study where he kept his antiquities. The photographs show how Freud's house and offices looked in 1938, just before he and Engelman separately had to flee the Nazi invasion.

Happily posterity is not dependent on descriptions or photographs alone for an understanding of Freud's collection, for it has been preserved in its entirety in the residence he established in London before his death in 1939. His daughter Anna, the internationally renowned psychoanalyst, still lives there. When I visited Miss Freud in April 1974, I was able to examine the collection in some detail. It was apparent to me that Freud had a special,

but by no means exclusive, love for Egyptian antiquities. I noted many bronze statuettes and stone heads of Egyptian gods, stelai, heads from mummy cases, wooden tomb objects, Faiyum portraits and other Egyptian artifacts. From the Near East there is a miscellany of objects: cuneiform tablets, cylinder seals, Syrian fertility goddesses as well as some Luristan bronzes. The range of Greek artifacts is also wide: Mycenaean statuettes, Archaic Greek sphinxes, fourth-century Tanagra figurines, painted vases, glass, and a variety of Hellenistic statuettes.

It is an amazing profusion, including Etruscan warriors and mirrors, Roman oil lamps, stone portrait heads, fragments of frescoes





Syrian terracotta goddess, second millennium B.C. Height, 7½ inches. In developing his ideas about the origins of civilization and the patriarchal family, Freud acknowledged his difficulty in placing ancient matriarchal worship. "I cannot suggest at what point in this process of development a place is to be found for the great mother-goddesses, who may perhaps in general have preceded the father-gods." (Freud, *Totem and Taboo* [London 1913] 149.)

Greek bronze kouros figurine from Italy, about sixth century B.C. Height, 7¾ inches. Freud underlined his interest in Greek archaeology in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess: "... otherwise I am reading Greek archaeology and revelling in journeys which I shall never make and treasures which I shall never possess." (October 14, 1900.)



Etruscan warrior, a bronze figurine of the sixth century B.C. Height, 7½ inches.





Freud's consulting room as it was reconstructed in his London house. He died in this room on September 23, 1939. Photographed by Walter Kaufman.

from Pompeii, Chinese Buddhas and jades, and so on. The collection is placed just as it had been in Vienna, on the tables in Freud's study and consulting room, on book shelves, in glass cabinets and on pedestals. Favorite pieces crowd his desk. In addition, an engraving of the monument of Abu Simbel in Luxor, pictures of the great Egyptian sphinx and the Roman Forum hang upon the walls.

Although the collection itself was confined to his study and consulting room, the pleasure it brought Freud could not help but permeate other parts of his life. Jones described his delight in making acquisitions; when he had bought a new piece, he would bring it to the dining room table, where he would set it down before him so that he could enjoy it during the family meal. Freud's colleague Hanns Sachs has spoken of his "habit of taking up one or another piece of his collection from its place, and of examining it by sight and touch while he was talking." (*Freud: Master and Friend* [Cambridge, Massachusetts 1944] 101.) Sachs further reported that Freud always wore a favorite

Roman seal ring which bore a delicately carved bearded head of Jupiter. He gave similar rings to six of his closest associates—Karl Abraham, Max Eitingon, Sandor Ferenczi, Ernest Jones, Otto Rank and Sachs himself. By this symbolic gesture, the Professor united the founders of the modern science of psychoanalysis through ancient artifacts.

Freud often purchased objects from an antiquities dealer in Vienna by the name of Robert Lustig. Today Lustig is a resident of the United States, and during an interview in 1974 he reminisced about his dealings with Freud. At Freud's own request, Lustig used to bring objects to Freud's office, and one day he brought the upper half of a lid from a mummy case. Freud was enchanted, but said he could not afford it. He offered a sum of money and some objects from his collection to make up the difference. "He opened a drawer that was so filled with Etruscan mirrors that I was overwhelmed," Lustig said. "I couldn't even stop to examine them, but took the top layer and departed!"



The numerous antiquities crowded into just one display case in Freud's London residence gives some impression of the extensiveness of his collection.  
Photograph by Walter Kaufman.

Upper portion of the lid from a mummy case purchased by Freud from the Viennese dealer Robert Lustig.  
Photograph by Walter Kaufman.



Freud's interest in archaeology was far from a superficial one. His early education had been typically Classical in its content. He had studied Latin eight hours each week and Greek six, learning to read Sophocles, Plato, Xenophon, Homer and Herodotus as well as Cicero, Vergil, Horace and others. This training later served him well in his pursuit of the study of antiquity. In fact, he once told his correspondent Stefan Zweig, "I have read more archaeology than psychology."

Whenever possible he sought to verify the provenance and authenticity of new additions to his collection, and he would send uncertain pieces to the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum for identification. He was also concerned with the details of workmanship, restoration and possible fraudulence.

Traveling with Freud must have been a stimulating experience. His younger brother Alexander, who was often his companion, complained that Freud wore him out "trying to see too many beautiful things in one day." Whenever he could, Freud visited Italy where

he would shed the gray cold of Vienna's winters and escape from the pressures of a world that was hostile to his theories. He was not drawn to the Mediaeval and Renaissance periods but recorded his delight in discovering places like Pompeii, Orvieto, Paestum as well as Syracuse and Segesta in Sicily. Archaeological excavations were underway in many of these places, and Freud was able to treat the entire country as a large Etruscan, Greek and Roman museum.

In fact, he enthusiastically visited museums whenever he had the chance, both at home and abroad. A regular attendant at the archaeological exhibitions at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, he was a lifelong friend and colleague of one of its curators, the late Ernst Kris, who himself made such fascinating contributions to the study of art and psychoanalysis. In London in 1908, he headed straight for the magnificent Egyptian collection in the British Museum, bought the catalogues and gave up a social evening in order to study for a museum visit the next day. He followed this





Roman bronze two-headed figurine, Minerva and Silenus, dating to the second century after Christ. Height, 6½ inches. This piece may have attracted Freud because it joined a symbol of rationality, that is the goddess of wisdom, with Silenus, a symbol of impulse and sexuality.

pattern in every large city he visited: in Paris, in Berlin, where he commented on the bas-reliefs of the Battle of the Gods and Titans from Pergamon, in Rome, where he exhausted himself in the Museo Nazionale and the Vatican Museum, and in New York where, in 1909 during his single brief visit to the United States, he made a special stop at the Metropolitan Museum to see the artifacts which had been excavated in Cyprus by General Luigi Palma di Cesnola.

Freud was a curious and eager student who felt no hesitation in calling on curators to explain unfamiliar items. Indeed, he was confident enough of his knowledge that he did not hesitate to enter into active debate with the experts themselves. This was especially true of those areas where archaeological interpretation shaded over into mythic and psychological concerns. Hanns Sachs has recorded an episode from a walking tour he made with Freud in 1922 in northwest Germany, while they were visiting a small museum in Hildesheim: "Freud was deeply interested. I have forgotten the technical details of his discussion with the custodian, but remember that the young Egyptologist demonstrated some relics of the oldest, most primitive mode of burial. The corpses, so he told us, were placed in a crouching position, quite resembling that of the embryo in the womb, but this could be only an accidental resemblance since these early Egyptians hardly had enough medical knowledge to be acquainted with the prenatal pos-



Egyptian bronze figurine of Amun-Re, seventh-fourth century B.C. Height, 11¾ inches. Freud would probably have found this figurine particularly interesting because of his interest in the origins of monotheism. At a much earlier time the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten tried to replace the multifarious religions of Egypt, particularly that of Amun-Re, with the monotheistic worship of the sun.

ture. Freud reminded him that much more primitive tribes had gained this information from animals; the Egyptians, who from the beginning had a passion for evisceration, were certainly not slow in making this discovery. Freud touched only lightly on the psychoanalytic aspect: the symbolic equations of Earth and Mother, of Death and Rebirth." (*Freud: Master and Friend*, 161.)

When later Freud had become fascinated with the problem of the origins of monotheism, he eagerly followed the discoveries at Tell el Amarna in Egypt concerning Aten, the sun god, and the reign of Akhenaten. Arnold Zweig, who had moved to Palestine, wrote to tell him that the names Moses and Aaron had been discovered on cuneiform tablets as pupils at the sun temple at Amarna. Freud replied that this must be wrong; that if there had been such a list of pupils studying at a temple, it would have been written in hieroglyphs and on papyrus, for the Egyptians used cuneiform only for correspondence with foreign countries. He later developed his hypothesis about Moses in the monograph *Moses and Monotheism*.





Wooden Egyptian tomb object dating to the Middle Kingdom, ca. 1900 B.C. Height, 13½ inches. Such ancient tomb objects emphasize Freud's interest in the themes of death and immortality as reflected in mythology, dream symbolism and ancient burial practices.

The crucial influence of Freud's interest in antiquity on his theoretical development may be clearly seen in his work on the Oedipus complex. In the course of his heroic and momentous self-analysis, which provided the foundation for all subsequent psychoanalysis, he began to suspect within himself the presence of a universal pattern: "I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a universal phenomenon of early childhood. . . . If that is the case, the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex*, in spite of all the rational objections to the inexorable fate that the story presupposes, becomes intelligible. . . . Every member of the audience was once a budding Oedipus in phantasy, and this dream-fulfillment played out in reality causes everyone to recoil in horror, with the full measure of repression which separates his infantile from his present state." (Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, October 15, 1897.)

More than a decade later, Freud was still

elaborating upon the same theme, and one of his letters to Jung reflects his interest in the interrelationships of myth, history and archaeology. He is referring to a discussion he had recently had with a young gymnasium instructor by the name of David Oppenheim: "At our first meeting, I learned from him that Oedipus is thought to have originally been a phallic demon like the Idean Dactyls (!): his name means simply 'erection.' Also that the hearth is a symbol of the womb because the ancients looked on flame as a phallus. The Vestal Virgins were like nuns, the brides of the hearth phallus. . . ." (Freud to Carl Jung, November 11, 1909.)

Two other letters to Fliess echo his preoccupation with human sexuality. Freud wrote the first after visiting a museum in Aquileia in northern Italy which contained a wealth of Roman finds: "There are several priapic statues. . . . [one shows] Priapus as an old man with a Silenus covering up his genitals for him . . . a stone priapic ornament . . . [has]—instead of a penis—a winged animal with a small penis of its own in the normal place and wings which themselves end in penes. Priapus stood for permanent erection, a wish-fulfillment representing the opposite of psychological impotence." (Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, April 4, 1898.) Or again, three years later: "Have you read that the English [Sir Arthur Evans] have excavated an old palace in Crete (Knossos) which they declare to be the original labyrinth of Minos? Zeus seems originally to have been a bull. The god of our own fathers, before the sublimation instigated by the Persians took place [Mithraism?], was worshipped as a bull. That provides food for all sorts of thoughts which it is not yet time to set down on paper. . . ." (July 4, 1901.)

The problems of death and immortality were another abiding preoccupation of Freud's. He had taken note of the paradox at the heart of archaeology—that things disappear and are reborn through discovery, only to be destroyed, in turn, by the very process of being discovered. Death also posed a deep personal problem for him, and his doctor Max Schur reported, "Until his last moment, Freud wrestled with this problem of the 'beyond,' the meaning of death, the necessity to die and the wish to live, both as a theoretical psychological concept and as the individual fate of each human being." (*Freud: Living and Dying* [New York 1972] 136.)



In 1911 he read a book about Ephesus by F. Sartiaux entitled *Villes mortes d'Asie Mineure*; it inspired him to write a brief paper called "Great Is the Diana of the Ephesians," after a poem by Goethe. (The original quote is in *Acts* 19:28.) Schur discussed this paper and observed that one of its themes was "the continuity of history over a period of centuries or even millennia; the rising of new monuments on the ruins or ashes of the old." Freud spoke of ancient Ephesus as a kind of "modern Lourdes," where pilgrims came to worship the mother goddess, Artemis-Diana. Legend subsequently linked the Virgin Mary to the city. Freud remarked "Now once again the city had its great goddess, and, apart from her name, there was little change." (quoted in Schur, *ibid.* 273f.)

It is equally interesting to watch Freud wrestling with the problem of building models to illustrate his theories. He drew with surprising frequency on his knowledge of archaeology to illuminate a hypothesis, as can be seen in this passage: "[The analyst's] work of construction, or if it is preferred, of reconstruction, resembles to a great extent an archaeologist's excavation of some dwelling-place that has been destroyed and buried or of some ancient edifice. The two processes are in fact identical, except that the analyst works under better conditions and has more material at his command to assist him, since what he is dealing with is not something destroyed but something that is still alive. . . . But just as the archaeologist builds up the walls of the building from the foundations that have remained standing, determines the number and position of the columns from depressions in the floor and reconstructs the mural decorations and paintings from the remains found in the debris, so does the analyst proceed when he draws his inferences from the fragments of memories, from the associations and from the behaviour of the subject of the analysis. Both of them have an undisputed right to reconstruct by means of supplementing and combining the surviving remains. Both of them, moreover, are subject to many of the same difficulties and sources of error. One of the most ticklish problems that confronts the archaeologist is notoriously the determination of the relative age of his finds; and if an object makes its appearance in some

particular level, it often remains to be decided whether it belongs to that level or whether it was carried down to that level owing to some subsequent disturbance. It is easy to imagine the corresponding doubts that arise in the case of analytic constructions." ("Constructions in Analysis," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* [London 1937] volume 23, 259.) There were occasions, however, when Freud felt that some of his models failed to capture the complex concepts he was trying to illustrate.

In 1930 Freud was examining the nature of memory and conservation in the mind. He had developed the hypothesis that "nothing once formed in the mind could ever perish, that everything survives in some way or another." He chose a fanciful version of the history of Rome to represent this difficult notion, only to recognize how limited it was, as he said, "to represent historical sequence in spatial terms." His effort nonetheless shows his powerful visual and poetic imagination: "Now let us make the fantastic supposition that Rome were not a human dwelling-place, but a mental entity with just as long and varied a past history: that is, in which nothing once constructed had perished, and all the earlier stages of development had survived alongside the latest. This would mean that in Rome the palaces of the Caesars were still standing on the Palatine and the Septizonium of Septimius Severus was still towering to its old height, that the beautiful statues were still standing in the colonnade of the Castle of St. Angelo, as they were up to its siege by the Goths, and so on. But more still: where the Palazzo Caffarelli stands there would also be, without this being removed, the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, not merely in its latest form, moreover, as the Romans of the Caesars saw it, but also in its earliest shape, when it still wore an Etruscan design and was adorned with terra-cotta antifixae. . . ." (*Civilization and its Discontents* [London 1930] 15ff.)

Freud's sensuous invocation of Rome appears deceptively effortless in the passage, but his actual arrival there was not so easily accomplished. Travel was an act of deep significance for Freud. During his self-analysis he had confronted his phobic incapacity to pay a visit to



the city of Rome. This despite the fact that he had frequently visited Italy. He wrote to Fliess in 1898 that he was studying Rome's topography and longed to see the city.

He did come to understand what complex internal forces were blocking him. Only several of the themes put forward by his biographers will be mentioned here. Rome, along with Athens, symbolized to Freud the height of western culture; they were the pinnacles of mankind's efforts to achieve a civilized state. But they also represented, in a more personal way to Freud, the great distance he had managed to travel in the course of his life. From an obscure and poverty-ridden boyhood, he had risen so far beyond the accomplishments of his father that he felt a sense of guilt at having been so fortunate. He had identified in boyhood with the towering figure of Hannibal and was later to see in retrospect that he had contrasted his father's weakness in the face of anti-semitism to the behavior of Hannibal's father, Hamilcar, who demanded that his son swear vengeance on his enemies—none other than the mighty Romans.

Freud overcame his avoidance of Rome and arrived there for the first time in 1901. He called it "an overwhelming experience." He was to return to Rome six more times in the course of his life.

Much later, in 1932, he remarked wistfully to Max Schur how he would like to have seen the new excavations being opened on Crete, and there is reason to believe that the life of an archaeologist might have had a great appeal for Freud. He had written to Ferenczi in 1922, "Strange secret yearnings rise in me—perhaps from my ancestral heritage—for the East and the Mediterranean and for a life of quite another kind: wishes from late childhood never to be fulfilled. . . ." He had hinted at this earlier, in a comment made after he had read Schleimann's *Ilios*: "I enjoyed the account of his childhood. The man found happiness in finding Priam's treasure, because happiness comes only from fulfillment of a childhood wish." (Freud to Fliess, May 28, 1899.)

These were the musings of a man whose life had been spent in a battle to establish revolutionary theories. The career of an archaeologist, for Freud, must have had a strong romantic appeal—that of time spent free to travel and work in exotic, far-away places. But these pleasures came to him vicariously in his

irrepressible love of antiquities. To Ferenczi he wrote—this was just after Ferenczi had purchased a villa in Buda, Hungary in 1930—that he hoped his friend would dig in his garden and discover that his villa had belonged to a Roman who had often traveled to Egypt and brought back many souvenirs! And at the age of eighty, he added a teasing postscript to one of his letters to his colleague Marie Bonaparte in Athens which reads, "And if you are omnipotent, make the museum give you a Korxi [*sic.*] for me!" (December 1, 1936.)

Freud's abiding interest in antiquity was reflected in his own wish that his work be remembered—that he join the Immortals. The wish was expressed in a dream he had about death and archaeology: he dreamt of being in a wooden house that was a coffin. The dream-wish, however, transformed this unhappy event into its opposite—Freud recalled being in a grave but on a summer holiday when he was happily pursuing his archaeological interests. In 1898 he had been in a newly excavated Etruscan tomb where the skeletons of two adult men were still in situ. The dream was reminding him that he must hurry: He was already growing older and much work remained to be done before he would be satisfied that his name would not be forgotten. (Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* [New York 1956] 454.) By the time of his death in September, 1939, Freud had indeed joined the Immortals.

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FOR FURTHER READING: Suzanne Cassirer Bernfeld, "Freud and Archaeology," *The American Imago* 8 (1951) 107-128; Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York 1956); Harry Trosman and Roger D. Simmons, "Freud's Library," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 21 (1973) 652-687.

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